

Examining Students' Intended Image on Facebook: “What Were They Thinking?!”

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The present article examines factors that influence why students post information on their social network profile which employers would find inappropriate. Results show that many students make a conscious attempt to portray a particular image and, as predicted, their intended image was related to whether they posted inappropriate information. Those who believed they portrayed a hardworking image were unlikely to post inappropriate information, whereas students who felt they portrayed an image that was sexually appealing, wild, or offensive were most likely to post such information. Limitations, implications for business education, and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Business education, Facebook, Intended image, Recruitment, Social networking

Over the past three years, Internet social networking has exploded in popularity as a means for young people to post profiles of themselves and communicate with one another (Levy, 2007). One report suggests that social-networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn, are among the most visited sites on the Internet, just behind the major search engines (Ronn, 2007). Facebook, which is the leading site for college students, has more than 7.5 million registered members at more than 2,000 U.S. colleges, with 150,000 new users being added each day (Cassidy, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Levy, 2007). Like other online social networking sites (e.g., Friendster, MySpace), users present themselves in an online profile, accumulate friends, and can post information or comments on each other's profiles. Users can also join virtual groups based on their common interests (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006).

Although Facebook provides a profile template with prompts for different kinds of personal information (e.g., favorite quotations, political affiliation, favorite music, education, etc.), users have considerable freedom to provide such information or not and to post any other information

or pictures of their choice. The result is that the content of information posted ranges from limited or tame information (such as pictures of one's pets) to extreme information (such as pictures and comments about one's sexual activities, use of alcohol, and/or drugs). For example, a recent study of 200 Facebook profiles found that 42% had comments regarding alcohol, 53% had photos involving alcohol use, 20% had comments regarding sexual activities, 25% had seminude or sexually provocative photos, and 50% included the use of profanity (Peluchette & Karl, 2007). These authors also examined wall comments or public messages that individuals post on each others' profiles and found that approximately 50% involved issues of partying, 40% involved negative comments about other people, 25% involved derogatory comments about employers, 18% involved sexual activities, and 10% involved negative racial comments.

It has been suggested that this reckless tendency to post anything and everything on one's profile is in part due to students' perceptions that the likelihood of anyone other than fellow students or recent alumni seeing their posting is remote (Lupsa, 2006). Yet, recent evidence suggests that employers are looking. According to Taylor (2006), using internet search engines such as Google, blogs (Web logs), and social networking Web sites (Facebook, MySpace) has become commonplace for screening potential job candidates. In support, a 2006 ExecuNet survey of 100 executive recruiters found that 77% use search engines as part of their

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recruitment process and that 35% have eliminated job candidates based on information they have found on the internet (Jones, 2006). That is up from 26% reported in the 2005 survey (Forster, 2006). Likewise, a study by CareerBuilder.com revealed that 26% of the 1,150 hiring managers surveyed said they used Internet search engines in their candidate screening process and 12% said they used social networking sites. Of those hiring managers that used social networking sites, 63% said they did not hire the person based on what they found (Sullivan, 2006). A study conducted at the University of Dayton revealed that 40% of employers would consider applicants' Facebook profiles as part of their hiring decision (Lupsa, 2006). Last, a survey that the Society for Human Resource Management conducted revealed that 15% of the HR professionals surveyed check social networking sites and approximately 40% who do not now use social network sites said they are "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to check them in the next 12 months (Zeidner, 2007).

Thus, it is evident that some employers consider social networking sites to be a valid source of information about potential job candidates, yet many students are posting information that most employers would find inappropriate. Together, these findings beg the question, "What were they thinking?!" The purpose of the present article is to investigate factors that influence why students post information to their profile which employers would find inappropriate. We will first examine what kind of image students are trying to portray and whether their intended image relates to whether or not they post inappropriate information. We will then examine the extent to which they are concerned about other nonstudents viewing their profile. This issue is of particular relevance to business educators who have the responsibility of preparing students to effectively enter the job market.

INTENDED IMAGE AND PROBLEMATIC PROFILE CONTENT

Much has been written about how the current younger generation is much less concerned about privacy than previous generations (e.g., Dolliver, 2007; Robinson, 2006; St. John, 2006). Details that older generations might find embarrassing, such as who one slept with last night, how many drinks one had at a friend's party, or scantily clothed pictures simulating risqué sex acts are not uncommon on Facebook (Cole, 2006; Epstein, 2006; Fuller, 2006). Although some studies suggest that users' comfort with revealing intimate details about themselves comes in part from a perception that their postings are somewhat private (Lupsa, 2006), others have suggested that young people today have a "willingness, bordering on compulsion, to broadcast the details of their private lives to the general public" (St. John, 2006, Section 9, p. 8). In a similar vein, Robinson claimed that younger generations have gotten used to living an open life, in part because they have been watched since daycare by baby monitors and

videotaped during their youth. Given the popularity in recent years of reality television shows, younger generations are enamored with the extensive details provided about others' daily lives.

Others have added that, even though Facebook offers various privacy settings, they are rarely used. It appears that not all students want to hide information about their personal life because the Internet lets them express themselves and find like-minded friends (St. John, 2006; Stone & Brown, 2006). Still others have found that many Facebook users intentionally misrepresent themselves or join groups that do not accurately depict who they are for the sake of humor or social approval. For example, in Brock's (2007) recent study, 8% of students said they exaggerated their alcohol or drug use in Facebook posts. Last, it has been suggested that some members of today's younger generation find it empowering to post provocative photos online: "When we see other teens getting attention from their silly (and often confessional) YouTube videos, we learn that keeping one's life an open book is a ticket to fame" (Funk, 2007, p. A11).

Even though the current college-age generation has some common characteristics that make it unique when compared to previous generations, there may still be individual differences in how they present themselves on their profile. Much of this depends on the image they wish to portray to others and who they perceive their audience to be. Alcohol and risky sexual behavior tend to be a big part of college life and are even considered as a rite of passage for some incoming freshmen (Lo, 2000; Marciszewski, 2006). For example, Wechsler, Dowdall, Davenport, and Castillo's (1995) nationwide study of binge drinking found that 44% engaged in such behavior. This trend does not appear to have changed much in recent years. Piacentini and Banister (2006) found that undergraduates view alcohol as playing a central part in student life, with excessive drinking being the norm. The desire to be socially accepted is what appears to be prompting individuals to engage in such behavior. When asking students why they drank alcohol or used illegal drugs, Shinew and Parry (2005) found that it was because of social reasons and that they usually engaged in these activities with their friends. These confirmed Lo's (2000) previous findings.

With alcohol, and in some cases, illegal drug use being a prominent part of college life, it is likely that those who wish to enhance their social acceptability would include photographs and comments of such activities. Their intent would be to appear wild or as someone who likes to party. Some may go so far as posting material that is of an exaggerated or offensive nature with the intent to humor and shock their audience. According to O'Brien (2007), there are several Facebook groups including "30 Reasons Girls Should Call it a Night" that are dedicated to women who are seemingly proud to publicize their drunken escapades. He adds that public urination, passing out in the street, and even vomiting on one's self are proudly posted on social networking profiles.

Research has also shown that both male and female college students place considerable emphasis on physical appearance and popularity with the opposite sex as factors influencing their prestige with others (Suito & Carter, 1999). Thus, the scantily clothed photos and stripper poses frequently found on Facebook profiles are likely a result of a students' intent to appear sexually appealing. In wanting to be socially accepted, those individuals who post sex or alcohol-related comments or photos would do so in an attempt to impress their peers. However, given that such content would not be socially acceptable to a general audience, it is likely that they would be less willing to want such information seen by their family or potential employers. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 1 (H_1): Those who wish to appear appealing to the opposite sex, wild, or offensive would be more likely to post problematic profile information as compared to those who are low on these dimensions.

H_2 : Those who wish to appear appealing to the opposite sex, wild, or offensive would be less likely to be OK with family or employers viewing their profile.

Other individuals may have different intentions in terms of the image they wish to portray to others on their profiles. For example, they may wish to appear friendly and would therefore post personal information that portrays a fun-loving image. This is consistent with Suito and Carter's (1999) findings that sociability was a significant factor contributing to college students' perceptions of prestige with others. At the same time, these individuals may want to avoid the risk of offending or putting off others. Piacentini and Banister's (2006) findings indicated that there are a number of college students who are not comfortable with the stereotypical image of excessive drinking and chose not to engage in such activities. As a coping strategy, they found that many were inclined to hide their nondrinking so as to avoid drawing attention to it. So, it would be expected that these students would choose nonalcohol related fun stuff to put on their Facebook profile, such as jokes or pictures of themselves with others having fun.

Likewise, a student may place great importance on their grades and academic success due to aspirations that they might have beyond college, such as graduate school or a professional program (e.g., medical school). As such, they would likely want to portray an intelligent or hardworking image. Research shows that college students' perceptions of prestige with others found that both males and females who were concerned with this placed considerable importance on grades and intelligence (Suito & Carter, 1999). With regard to information on their Facebook profile, individuals would likely post pictures and comments that are consistent with such activities, such as leadership roles in student organizations and honor societies. However, because these students also run the potential risk of violating social norms in that such activities are not consistent with the stereotypical image of college student life (Grabill, Lasane, Povitsky, Saxe,

Munro, Phelps, & Straub, 2005), they may be more subtle in their presentation of such information. Regardless, they would be less inclined to post inappropriate information to their profile. Thus, we predict:

H_3 : Those who wish to appear friendly, intelligent, or hardworking would be less likely to post problematic profile information as compared with those who are low on these dimensions.

H_4 : Those who wish to appear friendly, intelligent, or hardworking would be more likely to be OK with family or employers viewing their profile.

METHOD

Sample

The present study used a sample of undergraduate students enrolled in management and economics courses at a medium-sized university located in the Midwestern part of the United States. Participation was voluntary although participants were given some minimal course credit for doing so. Because undergraduate students are the primary users of social networking sites, we intentionally recruited undergraduate students to complete our survey. Of the 480 surveys distributed, 346 were returned for a response rate of 89%. Approximately 60% of the respondents were male ($N = 208$) and the mean age was 20.5 years ($SD = 2.17$). Approximately 52% ($N = 178$) indicated they were business majors and the remaining 48% indicated some other nonbusiness major. The average hours worked per week was 15.8 ($SD = 13.5$), although there was considerable variation.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of five sections: (a) demographic items including gender, age, academic major, hours worked per week, and social network use; (b) a problematic profile information measure; (c) students' perceptions regarding the image they feel they portray on their social network profile; and (d) students' beliefs regarding who is or should be viewing their social network profiles.

Problematic Profile Information

Respondents were asked how likely they would be to include 36 different items in their personal profile. The 36 items included various demographic information, photos, and beliefs. All items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*). Ten of these were combined to form a problematic information scale. These items included: self photo drinking alcohol, comments regarding personal use of alcohol, self photo (sexy or provocative), comments regarding sexual activities or sexual preferences, comments regarding participation in activities which are in violation of university policy, self photo seminude, self photo

with firearms, comments regarding use of illegal drugs, home address, self photo with sexual props, and self photo in the nude.

Image Portrayed on One's Social Network Profile

This 23-item measure was developed by the authors for the present study. After viewing several Facebook profiles, we identified four types of images that students were portraying including: (a) *appealing* to the opposite sex (sexy, popular, facially attractive); (b) *wild* (outrageous, bold, risk taker, partier); (c) *fun and friendly* (fun, friendly, likeable, good-natured, humorous); and (d) *offensive* (offensive, emotionally unstable, irresponsible, arrogant, immature). We also identified two images that would be of interest to employers including (a) *intelligent* (intelligent and high academic ability), and (b) *hardworking* (hardworking, trustworthy, conscientious, reliable). For each of the 23 items, respondents were asked to "indicate your level of agreement that others will believe that you have the following traits or characteristics after viewing your social network profile." All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Others' Access to One's Social Network Profile

This section consisted of three questions that Stutzman (2006) adapted. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement regarding three nonstudent groups accessing their social network profile (family, prospective or current employers, strangers). Each item read as follows: "I am OK with _____ accessing my social network profile." Respondents were also asked the following, "It is very unlikely that anyone other than my close personal friends will read my social network profile." All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among all variables are shown in Table 1. These results show that most respondents were in strong agreement that their Facebook profile portrayed images that were fun and friendly, hardworking, and intelligent. Respondents were somewhat neutral on whether their Facebook profile portrayed an image that was sexually appealing or wild, and generally disagreed that their image was offensive. However, we did find differences with respect to gender. Males were significantly more likely than females to report that their Facebook profile portrayed an image that was sexually appealing, wild, or offensive. Males were also significantly more likely than females to post problematic profile content. In addition, older students were significantly more likely to report that their

Facebook profile portrayed an image that was hardworking and intelligent.

With regard to intended image, those students who felt they portrayed a hardworking image were significantly less likely to post inappropriate content on their profile than students who did not portray a hardworking image. Portraying either an intelligent or fun and friendly image was not related to the posting of problematic profile content. Students who felt they portrayed a sexually appealing, wild, or offensive image were significantly more likely than those who did not portray such an image to post inappropriate profile content. Thus, H_1 was supported, and H_3 was only partially supported.

The results for students' opinions regarding others having access to their social network profile showed that most students agreed they were OK with family and somewhat neutral with regard to strangers or employers having access (see Figure 1). Students were also neutral regarding their belief that it would be unlikely for anyone other than their close friends to read their social network profile.

As shown in Table 1, those who were OK with either their family or employers seeing their profile, compared with those who are not, were significantly less likely to post inappropriate profile content and to portray an image that would be considered sexually appealing, wild, or offensive, thereby supporting H_2 . Those who were OK with either family or friends seeing their profile were more likely to portray a hardworking and intelligent image. However, portraying a fun and friendly image was unrelated to students' opinions regarding whether family, friends, or employers should have access to their profile, providing only partial support for H_4 . In contrast, those who were OK with strangers seeing their profile, compared with those who are not, were significantly more likely to post inappropriate content and to portray an image that would be considered sexually appealing, wild, or offensive. Those students who agreed that it would be unlikely for anyone other than their close friends to view their profile were less likely than those who disagreed, to portray an image that was fun and friendly, appealing, or wild.

DISCUSSION

In an attempt to answer the question "what were they thinking when they posted inappropriate information?" we examined the kind of image students believed they portrayed on their social network profile and whether or not their intended image related to whether they posted inappropriate information. As predicted, intended image was related to whether students posted inappropriate information. Those who were most likely to post inappropriate information were those who felt they portrayed an image that was sexually appealing, wild, or offensive, whereas those who believed they portrayed a hardworking image were unlikely to post inappropriate information. So, what were they thinking? It appears that many

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficient Alphas, and Intercorrelations Among All Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Gender	1.40	.49													
2. Age	20.53	2.17	-.07												
3. OK Family	4.37	1.29	.13	.09											
4. OK Strangers	3.27	1.46	-.24	.12	.15										
5. OK Employer	3.06	1.42	.08	.09	.50***	.31									
6. Unlikely Others Would Read SNP	2.69	1.30	-.02	.03	.04	-.09	.06								
7. Hardworking	3.91	.65	-.06	.17	.12	.02	.13	.04	(.77)						
8. Intelligent	3.74	.73	.04	.11	.17	.03	.10	-.04	.49***	(.73)					
9. Fun And Friendly	4.28	.49	-.01	.09	.06	.03	.00	-.12	.44***	.32***	(.77)				
10. Appealing	3.42	.75	-.20***	.04	-.10	.14	-.20***	-.23***	.20***	.21***	.44***	(.70)			
11. Wild	3.21	.90	-.24***	-.09	-.14	.12	-.29***	-.14	.11	.04	.28***	.43***	(.70)		
12. Offensive	1.99	.66	-.22***	-.05	-.26***	.15	-.25***	.07	-.14	-.18	-.20***	.14	.39***	(.70)	
13. Inappropriate Profile Content	1.87	.80	-.28***	-.05	-.30***	.19	-.33***	-.03	-.12	-.06	-.05	.29***	.43***	.43***	(.87)

Coefficient alphas are reported in parentheses in the diagonal.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

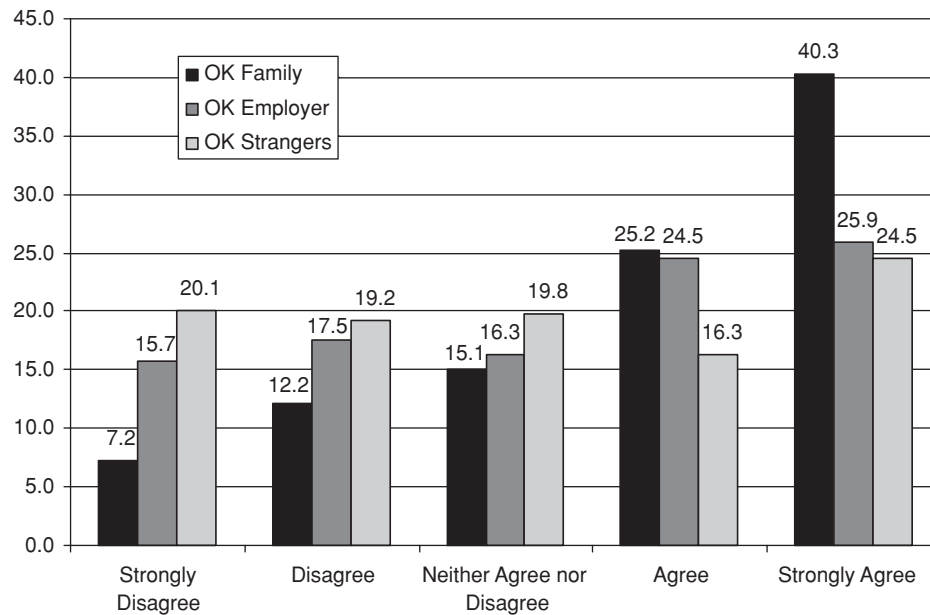


FIGURE 1 Percentage of students reporting they were "OK" with either their family, employer or strangers viewing their Facebook profile.

students make a conscious attempt to portray a particular image, and those who post problematic information do so to impress a particular audience, their peers.

The results of our study also suggest that some students make a conscious attempt to post only content that would be acceptable to a general audience and are therefore OK with employers or family viewing their profile. These individuals tend not to portray an image that is sexually appealing, wild, or offensive. In contrast, those who appear to intentionally portray such an image are OK with strangers viewing their profile. It appears that there is comfort in anonymity. That is, these individuals may feel, "If I don't know them, why should I care what kind of image I portray?" Last, we found that students who agreed it would be unlikely for anyone other than their close friends to view their profile were less likely than those who disagreed, to portray an image that was fun and friendly, appealing, or wild. These results suggest that many students may be using their social network profiles to meet new friends and establish new relationships as opposed to keeping in touch with their current close friends. In their attempt to impress their peers and be socially accepted, they conform to the expected norms for college students (i.e., fun, sexy, wild).

Our results certainly have implications for management educators and university career placement centers. The content and use of social networking sites should certainly be a topic of discussion in any management and human resource management course when addressing the issue of professionalism and recruitment or selection. Many business schools have business communication courses and classes or workshops that prepare students for entrance into the workplace. Given that problematic profile content can have implications

for both internship opportunities and job placement, it is important that the use of social networking sites and the consequences of posting problematic information be addressed early in a students' college career. Student organizations within business schools should also be encouraged to target this issue in their efforts to enhance the professionalism of their members.

In addition, career and placement staff should be advising students of the possible consequences of their Web site postings during freshman orientations and through student codes of conduct and information technology policies. One example of an institution that has taken such initiative is Cornell University. Their IT Policy Office has a "Thoughts on Facebook" document on their Web site (<http://www.cit.cornell.edu/oit/>) which advises students to think about their social networking behavior. For example, the first section of the document, labeled *Invincibility*, advises students to "think about not only your marketability today as a cool guy or girl in your college social circle, but who you might want to be in five or ten years when posting an 'identity' on the Internet." Another example is Indiana University who tacked up 1,000 flyers around campus stating "I Facebooked you!" to remind students that prospective employers, among others can view some or all of their profiles (Gerdes, 2006).

In discussing this issue with students, some may assume that it is illegal for employers to use Facebook content as part of their hiring decisions. This does not appear to be so. Employment lawyer George Lenard spoke with us and argued that employers are free to make unfair and arbitrary decisions as long as they do not violate specific laws. Thus, it would be unlawful discrimination for an employer to examine

the Facebook profiles of certain applicants (e.g., Hispanics, African Americans), but using comments or photos of parties and alcohol would not be discriminatory if the employer routinely checked the Facebook profiles of all candidates. Lenard (2006) also states that use of Facebook content by employers is not likely to be considered an invasion of privacy or a violation of the Fair Credit Reporting Act if obtained by background-checking services as long as they included a disclosure that such information was used as part of the employment decision. Employment lawyers interviewed by Greenwald (2008) noted that they were unaware of any legal decisions on this issue to date, however, many cautioned employers in their use of social network sites believing that there are likely to be lawsuits in the future and the burden would be on the employer to show that protected group status (e.g., race, religion, sex) did not enter into its hiring decision. Thus, although the legal question has yet to be resolved, business educators should be advising students that their postings, for the time being, are fair game for employers doing background checks.

Although our study provided some valuable insight into the relation between intended image and profile content, we recognize that there are limitations that provide opportunities for further research. All our surveys came from one university. Whereas our statistics were similar to those reported elsewhere, it is possible that norms regarding what is appropriate and inappropriate might vary from one university to another, or from one part of the country to another. In addition, because we used self-reports, it is possible that students under-reported the likelihood that they would include certain behaviors such as alcohol, drug use, or sexual behavior. They may also have under-reported the extent to which their profile portrayed an image that was offensive, wild, or sexually appealing and over-reported the extent to which they portrayed an image that was intelligent and hardworking. Future research should attempt to examine the relation between intended image and actual postings. It is possible that students may be naive with regard to the type of image they are actually portraying.

Some additional issues that should be examined in future research include users' reasons for using Facebook. Is it to keep in touch with close personal friends or to meet new friends? Do students use social network sites to build social capital? That is, are they trying to build relationships that may help them with success in their academic career or to advance their future careers and employment opportunities? In addition, as the Facebook organization widens access to the forum (through Google and other search engines), will the content of students' profiles change and become more appropriate for a general audience or will more students select the privacy options? Although this study has provided useful findings about the posting of problematic profile information and the intended image of students in their use of Facebook, we have only scratched the surface on what is known about this issue. We hope that our results and suggestions for future

research will provide a springboard for others to further investigate this popular and dynamic communication forum.

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